5.1 Scenes from Multiculturalism

The governance of multicultural societies requires acknowledgement of the diverse values attached to, or associated with, different cultures and ‘communities’, and decisions about what kind of difference, and how much, to recognize, formally and informally, in private and public spheres. Sometimes differences may appear incompatible, as when secular liberal values, by and large predominant in Western Europe, are confronted by claims for recognition of special privileges for the values and sensibilities of religion. Such claims may *seem* – ‘seem’ is the right word – especially challenging when emanating from religions with theologies or adherents of extra-European origin. A key question is how multicultural societies should respond (e.g. through legislation and/or negotiation and dialogue) to such challenges.

In recent years there has been a number of episodes in Britain and other European countries apparently involving confrontations between artistic freedom and religious sensitivities, and through these we may catch glimpses of the more general question outlined above. They have been occurring with seemingly increasing frequency since the Rushdie affair of 1989. In Rotterdam in 2002, for example, Muslim activists objected to a theatre company mounting a production of the opera *Aisha and the Women of Medina* whose central character was a wife of the Prophet Mohammed (Meuleman 2001). The opera was withdrawn. In November 2004, the Dutch filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, was murdered by a Moroccan-Dutch Muslim who opposed van Gogh’s film *Submission* about women and Islam. Based on a script by the Dutch-Somalian MP, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Submission* included images of a Muslim woman said to have been raped by a relative, and sequences in which women’s bodies were covered in verses from the
Koran, all thought to be highly offensive. Van Gogh himself was notorious for his opposition to organized religion, especially Islam (he referred to Muslims as “goat-fuckers”), and had supported the populist politician, Pim Fortuyn, himself assassinated in 2002. In 2005-6 cartoons, published in the conservative Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, which *inter alia* portrayed the Prophet as a terrorist, evoked a world-wide Muslim response,¹ and in September 2006, a production in Berlin of Mozart’s opera *Idomeneo* in which the director had inserted a scene including the severed head of the Prophet, was due to be cancelled following protests, but was eventually performed.

Although popularly associated with Islam such confrontations are by no means only about the Muslim religion: opposition to the filming, in 2006, of Monica Ali’s novel *Brick Lane* (2003) by Bangladeshi residents of the London borough of Tower Hamlets was more to do with the novel’s representation of their culture than with any critique of their faith. In any case, they are not confined to Muslims. In 2006 the Hindu Forum of Britain organized a successful protest against the exhibition at Asia House in London of the work of the “controversial Indian artist Maqbool Fida Husain, whose offensive paintings of Hindu Gods and Goddesses in sexual poses have caused outrage over the years amongst Hindus around the world”,² and what became known as the *Behzti* affair (*infra*) involved British Sikhs. Nor do they involve only what are conventionally thought of as non-Western religions. In the UK in 2005 there was controversy over the televising of *Jerry Springer: The Opera* which offended certain Christians. Moreover, they are not restricted to religious minorities in Europe. In Egypt in 2004, for instance, Coptic (Christian) youths objected to the showing of an Egyptian film *I Love the Cinema*, criticized for its “scornful and insulting depiction of Coptic faith and culture”,³ and in India in 2005 there were protests against the alleged denigration of Sikhism in a Bollywood film, *Jo Bole So Nihal*.

The first part of this chapter analyses the circumstances surrounding one of these episodes, the *Behzti* affair of December 2004, placing it in its wider (local, national, international) contexts, and seeking clues as to how to interpret what was ostensibly a confrontation between the incompatible values of artistic licence and religious sensitivity. The chapter presents

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¹ There is a substantial literature on the Rushdie affair (Grewal 2006), and much has been written about the van Gogh murder (e.g. in English, Buruma 2005, 2006, Eyerman 2005). The response to the Danish cartoons, academic and non-academic, threatens, eventually, to be overwhelming.
